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# Faith-Based Voluntary Action: A Case Study of a French Charity<sup>+</sup>

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*Following legal changes in the 1980s, the Voluntary and Community sector/économie sociale in France has become culturally diverse as faith-based organisations serving minority ethnic communities have developed, including charities inspired by religious and cultural principles of charitable giving. In this article, we use a case study of a social welfare charity established in a Parisian suburb with a culturally diverse population. Worldwide social welfare work is a priority; the charity responds to disasters, but it prioritises long-term development actions, encouraging the direct involvement of local communities. In recent years, its work has also embraced distressed communities within France.*

## Introduction

The focus of this article is faith-based voluntary action. There has been growing interest worldwide in faith-based organisations (FBOs) and their role in providing services to the poor (Clarke, 2006). In the UK under New Labour, engaging ‘faith communities’ became an important element of public policy, including urban regeneration and working with disadvantaged communities (Harris *et al.*, 2003; Cairns *et al.*, 2005; Furbey and Macey, 2006; Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2009). Government expectations that FBOs will deliver on policy priorities, however, are sometimes frustrated. For example, in their recent work on UK faith-based and secular voluntary organisations working with the homeless, Johnsen and Fitzpatrick (2009) found that secular organisations were more likely to comply with government agenda to impose conditions on recipients with the aim of changing their behaviour, while some Christian organisations resisted that pressure on the basis that God’s love is for all and unconditional (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2009). In this article, we turn to France, where historically the complex relations between Church and state have impacted on faith-based voluntary organisations. We begin by briefly reviewing the history of relations between the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS)/ économie sociale<sup>1</sup> and the state, and then explore the impact of French Republicanism and secularism on relations between the state and the VCS.

As in the UK, the roots of voluntary action in France can be traced back to the Middle Ages. Faith-based voluntary action has long been an important mission of the Roman Catholic Church in France, such as assisting the poor, providing hospitals. But faith-based

voluntary organisations ceased when the sector was secularised and restricted following the French Revolution of 1789 (Archambault, 2000 and 2001). The nineteenth century was a formative century for the VCS when there was an outburst of ideas, concepts, experiences and cooperative and associative or mutual aid practices (for a fuller discussion see Bouchard *et al.*, 2000; Lévesque *et al.*, 2001).

Since the separation of the Church and the state in 1905, the temporal and spiritual worlds have become separated (Acomb, 1941). And relations between the VCS and the state have become complex. The principle of laïcité in Article 1 of the French Constitution formally states that France is a secular republic (*La France est une République indivisible, laïque, démocratique et sociale*). Since the end of the nineteenth century, the principle of laïcité has meant the freedom of public institutions, especially primary schools, from the influence of the Roman Catholic Church. Today this concept covers other religious movements, and debate has included, for example, the wearing of religious dress or symbols, such as the hijab in schools.

One particular impact of the concept of French Republicanism has been the central role of the state in everyday life. French citizens tend to look to the state to resolve problems much more than in Anglo-Saxon culture. So, while the Roman Catholic Church did not cease in their mission of charity, the state and secular organisations have played an increasingly important role in the delivery of social welfare since 1905. Nevertheless, the principle of laïcité is so embedded in French culture that state social welfare dominates French life. Private and faith-based charity is viewed with some suspicion, and as a result the VCS (secular or faith-based organisations) is less important than in the United Kingdom.

Since the 1970s, the role of the VCS has expanded as a response to the changing economic landscape, with the growth in the number of small non-profit organisations with social objectives, of collectives favouring cooperative production; as well as the establishment since the 1980s of enterprises d'insertion, which act as labour market intermediaries (Archambault, 2000). A further radical change occurred in 1981, when legal changes made it easier for migrant associations to be formed, and as a consequence there has been a growth in faith-based associations serving minority ethnic communities (Kepel, 1987). In addition, registered charities inspired by Islamic principles of charity and independent of mosques have been established. Since this important legal change, the structure and composition of the VCS in France has become much more culturally diverse (Archambault, 2000).

In this article, we present a case study of a social welfare charity inspired by Islamic principles of charitable giving and illuminate how this impacts on its social welfare work, which focuses on international development. We also focus on how the case study charity is innovative in reaching groups within French society whom the state sometimes find difficult to engage with – namely, Muslim communities in the Parisian suburbs. Finally, we highlight the relationship between the French state and this charity.

Zakat (or charity) is the Islamic doctrine of alms giving for practicing Muslims (for a fuller discussion see below), and the material resources generated by Zakat provide important resources for faith-based voluntary organisations in secular states to undertake their charitable work. The case study organisation undertakes social welfare work at a number of spatial scales. The organisation is located in suburban Paris (cf. Montagné Villette, 2004; Montagné Villette and Hardill, 2007), one of the key clusters of Muslims in France (Cesari, 1994); it is active locally and internationally. There is a growing awareness

of the importance of the international development work of faith-based charities, including Islamic charities (Clarke, 2006).

Islam is widely considered to be Europe's fastest-growing religion, and the French Muslim population is the largest in western Europe, totalling five million (about 8 per cent of the population), mainly clustered in suburban Paris, Marseille, Lyon and the Nord (INSEE, 2010). About 70 per cent of French Muslims have their heritage in the former French north African colonies of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia (*ibid.*; Fouquet *et al.*, 1990).

For practising Muslims, wherever they reside, charity is fundamental; indeed Zakat (charity) is one of the five Pillars of Islam. Charity is therefore encouraged by Islam. Zakat means both 'purification' and 'growth', and is obligatory for those adults who are financially able (Ruthven, 1997). Zakat is divided into Zakat Fitrah, which is obligatory, and this annual payment is usually made during Ramadhan. The second form of Zakat is for wealth and possessions, and this is again paid annually. In addition, there is Fidyah, which is a form of penalty given to those who for valid reasons are unable to fast during Ramadhan. In Islamic countries, Zakat and Fidyah can be levied by the state, while in secular states Muslims can offer their Zakat and Fidyah to mosques and Islamic charities. The case study charity is therefore able to receive resources via Zakat and Fidyah. As we mentioned earlier, the importance of charity within Islam has become more and more visible in France, and in the remaining part of this article we present a case study of a French charity inspired by the Islamic vision of charity.

### **A case study of Islamic charity**

There has been a considerable debate on the use of case studies in academic research (Hamel, 1992; Stake, 1994). Case studies are widely used in social research in order to investigate contemporary phenomena within their real-life context (Harper, 1992; Mahoney, 2003; Yin, 2003). They have been used by researchers to explore a single entity, process or phenomenon. A wide variety of data collection methods may be used within the case study approach. This article draws on research undertaken as part of a wider study of faith-based voluntary organisations in suburban Paris, which were inspired by a number of faiths, notably Islam and Christianity. In this article, we focus on one case, an Islamic charity, as the use of a single case is perhaps most effective in exploring the complexities, contradictions and ambiguities revolving around faith-based voluntary action. Case study research is valuable in the repertoire of policy-oriented researchers because it is sensitive to context, detail and complexity in ways that can help to explain links between policy and outcomes for individuals and places.

We used a combination of techniques within the overall case study approach: observation of service delivery, collection of documentary evidence and semi-structured interviews with key informants in France and the UK working for the French organisation and the UK 'parent'. The data are therefore derived from the charity's own documents, and from the interview accounts of its staff. As a result, the data which the article draws on represent the charity's own perspective of the work of the organisation rather than the perspective of service users, social partners, donors or Government partners. We studied the case inductively, beginning with the case study and then examining some of the issues which emerged from it. We impartially report the findings, including contradictions. Some of the key informants' knowledge of the organisational history did not stretch back to the

formation of the charity. We have thus attempted to raise a number of issues for further exploration, rather than select a single question for detailed investigation.

The case study organisation was established less than twenty years ago as a fund-raising branch for a British-based international charity inspired by Islamic principles of charity, which is active in international development. The fund-raising branch opened in suburban Paris, where there was a significant cluster of practicing Muslims largely of African and Asian heritage. It now has a number of projects, it runs a shop, has offices and accommodation for homeless people in suburban Paris. We will look briefly at the work of the UK 'parent' and then return to the suburban Paris charity.

The UK 'parent' was established in the early part of the 1980s as a response to the terrible famines in Ethiopia and Sudan at the time. Relief items were sent to both these countries to alleviate the famine and – such was the tremendous response from the donor public – that work continued from there (source: interview). The initial idea to undertake this charitable work came from a group of medical students doing their postgraduate studies in the UK. They were non-UK nationals whose inspiration was the charitable traditions of Islam expressed through the work of a modern-day international aid agency. Zakat plays a major role in the work of the UK 'parent' and is a very important source of giving for their donors, 'to pay Zakat is a religious obligation and donors appreciate the opportunity to reach people in need thousands of miles away through organisations such as UK 'parent' (interview). The founder of the UK 'parent' remains active in the organisation, and his work was officially recognised in the Queen's birthday honours in 2010. The French branch opened for the same humanitarian reasons (interview).

Clarke (2006) has developed a typology of faith-based organisations active in international development (see Figure 1, below). This typology captures a variety of organisational forms and a range of challenges in development policy contexts. Faith-based representative organisations, for instance, vary across the main faiths; the mainstream Christian churches (Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox/Coptic) are hierarchically organised. Other key religions, however, are less hierarchically organised. Islam, for instance, is based on significant devolution of religious and political authority and no single organisation represents the Muslim faith globally (although the Saudi-sponsored World Muslim League enjoys support among many Sunni Muslims) (ibid., 840).

The British 'parent' charity is an example of a 'faith-based charitable or development organisation', which Clarke argues, 'mobilise the faithful in support of the poor and other social groups, and which fund or manage programmes which tackle poverty and social exclusion' (ibid.: 840). The UK 'parent' charity has grown throughout its twenty-five-year history and is now one of the UK's top 100 charities, with an expenditure in excess of £42 million in 2008 (the latest year accounts are available, UK 'parent' Annual Report, 2008). The focus of the work of the UK charity remains international, it is active in twenty-five countries, and it continues to take inspiration from Islamic values (ibid.). As well as responding to disasters and emergencies, the UK 'parent' promotes sustainable economic and social development by working with local communities.

As we have already noted, the French branch opened for the same humanitarian reasons as the UK 'parent'. It did encounter some problems operating in the early 1990s (source: interview). Since 1992, it has been autonomous, once it became easier to operate as an independent Voluntary and Community Sector Organisation (VCSO). While it is independent of the UK 'parent' with its own trustees, etc., the two organisations do work together on various issues, depending upon the circumstances; and, reflecting this, the

- faith-based representative organisations or apex bodies which rule on doctrinal matters, govern the faithful and represent them through engagement with the state and other actors;
- faith-based charitable or development organisations which mobilise the faithful in support of the poor and other social groups, and which fund or manage programmes which tackle poverty and social exclusion;
- faith-based socio-political organisations which interpret and deploy faith as a political construct, organising and mobilising social groups on the basis of faith identities but in pursuit of broader political objectives or, alternatively, promote faith as a socio-cultural construct, as a means of uniting disparate social groups on the basis of faith-based cultural identities;
- faith-based missionary organisations which spread key faith messages beyond the faithful, by actively promoting the faith and seeking converts to it, or by supporting and engaging with other faith communities on the basis of key faith principles;
- faith-based illegal or terrorist organisations which engage in illegal practices on the basis of faith beliefs or engage in armed struggle or violent acts justified on the grounds of faith.

*Figure 1.* Typology of faith-based organisations active in international development  
Source: Clarke (2006: 840).

French charity appears as a 'partner' organisation in the accounts of the UK 'parent' along with ten other partner organisations located elsewhere in Europe, Africa and North America (UK 'parent' Annual Report, 2008). Since 1992, the focus of the work of the Paris-based French charity has been helping vulnerable people, giving them support and bearing witness to their situations (Secours Islamique, 2008). Their mission is to alleviate the sufferings of 'the most deprived people in France and in the world', within the scope of Islamic values and Republican principles: neutrality, independence, impartiality, respect for cultural, religious and social diversity (*ibid.*). The French charity is a 'faith-based charitable or development organisation' in Clarke's typology (2006). While its focus is still largely international development work, the French charity is different to its UK 'parent' in that it now intervenes in a limited way to alleviate hardship in France.



As the organisation is a registered charity, the donations they receive, such as via Zakat, benefit from the tax allowance granted to state-approved organisations. Therefore, nothing sets the organisation apart from other similar organisations, such as the Secours Catholique (2008), except for the fact that the organisation is much younger. In a country with five million practicing Muslims, in addition to providing a vehicle for Muslims to deliver Zakat and Fidyah, the organisation also relies on volunteers to deliver aid to the growing numbers of Muslims facing financial hardship in France, especially in helping the homeless. However, the geographical focus of the organisation in France remains suburban Paris. It is very centralized in terms of its geographical presence as well as in terms of governance, unlike the structure of Islam, which is based on significant devolution of religious authority, whether in France or globally (Clarke, 2006).

#### *Worldwide action as a priority*

While the French charity remains a small organisation, the number of paid staff has more than doubled in recent years, increasing from thirty to seventy (source: interview). It also has 250 active volunteers (source: interview). Like the UK 'parent' charity, most of their charitable work is international in focus, directed towards those in severe need in Africa and the Near and Middle East (respectively 49 and 33 per cent of their actions). Asia and Europe each represent 9 per cent of social actions. Recent annual reports list five new countries – Madagascar, Senegal, Syria, Chad and Palestinian autonomous territories – that received priority help during 2008 (the latest year accounts are available), but actions have been carried on in many countries with relatively small amounts varying between 1,000 Euros (China) and 200,000 Euros (Chechnya, Sudan, Mali). America is the continent where the charity is the least active, with only one large-scale mission in Haiti.

While the charity responds to emergencies, such as recent crises in Haiti and Madagascar, they favour long-term development actions, with the direct involvement of local communities, true action aid, to help these communities gain some autonomy. In these long-term actions, the focus of interventions includes providing access to clean water, food safety and health or child sponsorship. They have more recently set up a strategy aimed at raising institutional funds from large national and international backers so as to strengthen their programmes. The budget for social missions increased by 58 per cent between 2007 and 2008 and now totals 5,568,915 Euros. It is essentially directed towards international actions, which constitute 96.5 per cent of allocated funds compared to 3.5 per cent for France, where actions have only just started.

Since 2007, the French charity has started to intervene in France, and this local intervention is a response to a request from local donors who were eager to make their patronage more visible (interview). We have not been able to match the degree to which the geography of donors and the geography of local actions match. The total budget dedicated to France – 184,000 Euros in 2008 – is relatively modest compared to the total funds collected – 8,928,607 Euros in 2008. The information contained in Table 1 details the allocation of resources in France.

With this modest budget a limited number of clients, 183 families and 5,329 people were helped in 2008. As can be seen from Table 1, emergency help is offered to thirty families in suburban Paris; aid is given to prisoners in the Paris area and in the provinces (1,410 people). The charity offers emergency help using mobile teams of thirty volunteers



Table 1 Distribution of local French aid

Interventions	Budget in Euros	% of budget	Number of recipients
Grocery store Suburban Paris	107,123	58.2	153 families
Ramadhan and Aïd Al Adha operations	65,035	35.3	3,559 persons
Emergency help Suburban Paris	4,444	2.4	30 families
Aid to prisoners	8,220	4.4	1,410 persons
Mobile help for homeless in Suburban Paris	3,782	2.0	360 persons

Source: Secours Islamique (2008).

in suburban Paris under contract from the state, via the 115 emergency telephone numbers and the Samu Social (Public Social Emergency Service). The operations carried out during Ramadhan and Ait Al Adha (one-third of the budget) offer assistance to 'deprived people without distinction of race and religion' (Secours Islamique, 2008), but are nevertheless targeted at those living in hostels such as ADOMA hostels (formerly Sonacotra Hostels), who are mainly workers from Northern and sub-Saharan Africa (*ibid.*).

The grocery store project is distinctive, and marks the charity out from other charities in France who draw their inspiration from other religions. The grocery store accounts for half the French funds. It is a unique solidarity-based grocery store that helps beneficiaries realise a personal project as well as accessing cheaper food products. Unlike other similar organisations like Les Restos du Coeur that distribute food to means-tested households, the charity makes the receipt of aid conditional on changing behaviour in some way. Applicants go through the usual channel of state social workers in charge of assessing an applicant's material resources, but they are only accepted under strict conditions. The applicant must demonstrate his/her sense of responsibility and his/her ability to stabilise his/her social position. He or she must attest that they have taken out house insurance as well as a supplementary health insurance for themselves and their children, that they have accessed and benefit from all their welfare entitlements, they must also show hospital bills, and pay for their housing service charges monthly. In order to avoid fraud, the charity only takes care of people referred to them by institutional partners (local councils, family allowance funds, hospitals) and only then does the charity select clients.

Access to the grocery shop is conditional upon the realisation of a project, using income saved for the benefit of the family, such as debt repayment, holiday trip for the children, training programme, driving licence financing, so as to prevent clients from merely relying on state aid. The recipient, who can use the facility twice a week and for a limited period of six months only, pays 10 per cent of the purchase price of the goods. The savings thus made are designed to be used by them to carry out a personal project that has been designed in agreement with the social worker beforehand (as outlined above). During 2009, about 150 families shopped at the store and this number will rise to 250 families by the end of 2010.

The grocery shop works in partnership with ADNES (the national association for the development of solidarity-based groceries). ADNES gets diverse funds and has a network for collecting food from producers; and has a well-developed logistics network and a

social enterprise for processing and recovering unsold produce from the Marché d'Intérêt National de Rungis (the wholesale food market for Paris). They are able to offer food products at 10 per cent of their market value. On the other hand, the charity was refused access to other food bank social enterprises, which are the main providers of cheap food for the VCS.

Like other VCOS, the charity also collects domestic electrical appliances that they sell for a token price. Since 2009, they have also provided temporary accommodation for those in need since they acquired five rooms in an ADOMA hostel in suburban Paris and a four-room flat for three people, offering a shared kitchen and living room. They also intend to develop an action in partnership with social housing landlords, aiming at adding an extra 50 Euros to the temporary rent allowance paid by the state. Bearing in mind their concern to make recipients responsible, they would make this aid conditional upon attending a workshop on housing education, in order to teach families how to hold on to accommodation, good budgeting, including anticipating and managing their expenses. The number of people that could be assisted through this programme is not known.

The actions of the charity are strongly underpinned and imbued by Islamic views on money and credit. A micro credit operation, which started in 2008 in collaboration with the Crédit Municipal de Paris, was soon ended following pressure from donors, because credit is prohibited by Islam (cf. Maali *et al.*, 2006). But in 2008, the charity intended to invest their unused assets 'so that they do not fall in value and produce some profitability' (Secours Islamique, 2008). It is not known whether this investment policy has also been abandoned.

#### *Limited geographical area of intervention*

The list of institutional partners working with the charity may be long, both within France (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, family allowances fund of [Parisian suburb], health insurance fund, local social welfare centres, etc.) and worldwide (UNICEF, UNHCR), but the charity receives limited direct funding from French public authorities. The financial aid from state institutions did not exceed 18,000 Euros, i.e. 0.1 per cent of the revenues of the charity in 2008. Nevertheless, the local social missions of the charity align closely with the scope of French public policy, such as the provision of housing aid and mobile help for the homeless. The solidarity-based grocery store and the distribution of electrical appliances are similar to work undertaken by long-established community networks. The largest part of the cost of the local mission is real estate and social on costs related to employing qualified and authorised social workers, youth workers and professional social workers.

Geographically the work of the charity remains centred on suburban Paris. The importance of the Muslim community there and its proximity to Paris could explain why the branch of the UK charity was first established in this area. And this geographical focus has not changed, despite the head office moving within suburban Paris, a relocation justified by matters of logistics and by opportunities in real estate. The new premises allow for a number of key activities to be co-located, such as the charity's head office, and four departments – human resources, finance, administration, programmes and operations – along with all the logistic functions together in the same building. The charity now has a physical presence at two sites in suburban Paris.

However, it is surprising that the charity is hardly visible in provincial France, including Bouches-du-Rhône (Marseilles), in the North and Lyon, three significant clusters of French Muslims. Some interventions have taken place in Aix-en-Provence in collaboration with the Muslim students association, and in Avignon, but they constitute local initiatives more than parts of an overall strategy to be set up on French territory (interview). In other words, the charity remains a very centralised relief organisation in terms of real estate, the delivery of local aid and volunteering opportunities, which does not reflect the spatial distribution of the Muslim communities in France. We can ask why? But we have no data on the spatial distribution of charitable giving, which could be more spatially diverse. In contrast, the UK 'parent' also was pivotal in the establishment of a UK branch, and this UK branch has a physical presence in most Muslim communities in urban England, so it has a wider geographical physical presence when compared to the French charity (interview).

In the same way we can ask why the French charity abstains from certain actions one normally associates with faith-based charities? Unlike for example, Cimade or Secours Catholique, it does not offer help to clients who need help with obtaining papers, dealing with French bureaucracy or help with learning French, as if they did not want to notice the presence of foreign populations in difficulties. Similarly, health care aid is not one of their concerns since they feel that access to health care is free in France (source: interview).

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have focused on faith-based voluntary action in France, a country where relations between the VCS and state have long been complex because of the impact of republicanism and secularism. The concept of French Republicanism gives the state a central role in everyday life, and traditionally French citizens look to the state to resolve problems much more than in Anglo-Saxon culture. In addition, the principle of *laïcité* is so embedded in French culture that state social welfare dominates French life. Private and faith-based charity is viewed with some suspicion, and as a result the VCS is less important than in the United Kingdom. But, since 1981, legal changes in France have made it easier for migrant associations to be formed, and as a consequence the French VCS has become more culturally diverse, thanks in part to the establishment of VCSOs inspired by Islamic notions of charity (Archambault, 2000).

We have used empirical description to present a case study of a French charity inspired by the Islamic vision of charity, and this is primarily directed to international development work. The charity receives limited resources from the French state and relies heavily on charitable donations. As we have already mentioned, the case study has a particular international focus in its social welfare work, especially long-term development work, with a particular emphasis on the direct involvement of client communities, combining social welfare with empowerment and education. The charity also offers emergency aid in response to international disasters. More recently, it has begun to intervene in France, and it now also delivers social welfare in distressed communities largely in suburban Paris. This work developed following a request from local donors to make their patronage more visible.

The case study charity is not dependent on state finance for its social welfare work in France. Yet it appears to work very closely with state agencies in helping distressed communities, such as working with the homeless as well as other project work, including

the grocery store. From a UK perspective, the objectives of the charity such as 'making recipients responsible' and avoiding 'welfare dependency' whilst informed by Islam, would also meet the UK government's policy of responsible citizenship (Dwyer, 2010, but see also Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2009). Whilst some aid is given unconditionally, such as disaster relief and helping the homeless in Paris, for other projects assistance is given under certain conditions, such as low income, but clients must also display a willingness to change their behaviour (for example, better management of household finances). Finally, while the French case study charity does not have a political programme in France, by the very nature of some of the distressed communities it helps, such as giving its support for the Palestinians and in general for the most Islamist countries of Africa, it does by implication show its preferential orientations clearly in France.

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### Note

1 The term *économie sociale* was first used in France in 1830 by French economist Charles Dunoyer (Mouleart and Ailenei, 2005), and it was the French sociologist Frédéric Le Play who contributed significantly to the rise and acceptance of this concept in socioeconomic analysis (Archambault, 2001).

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